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ABSTRACT

This study surveys practicing school psychologists (N=86) in both private and public sectors for their estimates of the time required to administer, score, and interpret the tests they regularly administer in their schools. It provides school districts and school psychologists with time estimates, which can be used to quantify the actual time spent in the assessment process. Results show that the various Weschler scales were the first choice of participants. School psychologists expressed a moderate preference for tests that are economical in the terms of time. It seems that tradition also plays a significant role in assessment. Some instruments have a solid theoretical and research foundation that enhances their acceptance and use. School psychologists disagree about the time demands required by various instruments. This is especially obvious in the time estimates of test interpretation. The use of technology in assessment raises ethical and standards of practice questions. While technology may save time, it may also diminish professional integrity and standing in the psychological community. Because of the small sample size each respondent only provided data for a subset of the tests included in the study. Therefore this study should be considered a pre-study. Issues to be addressed in future studies are discussed. (MKA)

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Time Demands of Psychological Assessment:

Implications for School Psychology

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Time Demands of Psychological Assessment:

Implications for School Psychology

Assessment is inherent in the practice of school psychology. Even though school psychologists develop a number of competencies, assessment is considered one of the defining activities of the profession (Fagan & Wise, 1994). Teachers, parents, and other service providers usually associate school psychology with assessment, diagnosis, and classification. Certainly, there are both external and internal factors that contribute to this professional stereotype. Externally, more than any other branch of psychology, school psychology is influenced by federal legislation and case law. Prime examples are PL 94-142 and Larry P. v. Riles, which mandated nondiscriminatory evaluation for any child in consideration of special services. Internally, perhaps as a consequence of legislation, assessment techniques and practices form the backbone of many training programs, both at the Ed.S. and Ph.D. levels. Assessment is emphasized at the expense of other related activities, such as counseling and intervention planning. Yet, most studies (Reschly & Wilson, 1995) find that school psychologists would prefer to do less testing, not more. Thus, among school psychologists the demands of assessment are a source of seemingly unending professional discussion.

Several surveys among practitioners have attempted to determine how psychologists spend their time. Fewer have actually attempted to quantify the actual amount of time psychologists spend on actual assessment (e.g., Sundberg, 1961; Ramage, 1979; Smith, 1984). Results from these surveys vary, with psychologists reporting anywhere from 50-75% of their time spent on assessment activities (e.g., Reschly & Wilson, 1995). However, these surveys usually draw respondents from the fields of clinical and counseling psychology. Surprisingly, no surveys have asked school psychologists about the time devoted to specific assessment instruments and practices.

The present study surveyed practicing school psychologists, in both private and public sectors, for their estimates of the time required to administer, score, and interpret the tests they regularly administer in their schools. Interestingly, a perusal of test manuals finds publishers often omit the time demanded of scoring and interpretation. When any time estimates are provided, they are generally only estimates of administration time. Nevertheless, it is believed that school psychologists spend a considerable portion of their time interpreting, reporting, and scoring the results of psychoeducational assessment.

Which tests do school psychologists use most often? A final purpose of the present study was to provide estimates of the tests school psychologists prefer to use when testing academic achievement, adaptive behavior, cognitive ability, and nonverbal intelligence. School psychologists' preferred measures of global behavior and projective instruments are also presented. These data provide some insight as to the acceptance and use of recently published instruments and revised versions of existing instruments.

Method

Subjects and Questionnaire.

Surveys were distributed at professional conferences and meetings in Florida, Nevada, and Georgia between April and August, 1999. The two-page questionnaire solicited descriptive information about respondents and their assessment practices. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate and designate the amount of time spent in test administration, scoring, and interpretation. Test instruments were selected for inclusion on the questionnaire on the basis of their frequency of use, as reported on previous surveys (e.g., Wilson & Reschly, 1996). As a means of comparison with previous studies, the questionnaire also required respondents to indicate their preference for each test. Newly published tests were added in order to ascertain their use and acceptance among respondents. Increasingly, computer software is being used in the assessment process. Thus, respondents were also asked to indicate their use of technology (e.g., scoring and report writing programs) in reference to each instrument. Of 103 surveys collected, 17 had incomplete/inaccurate information (e.g., indicating amount of time as a percentage, rather than in hours and minutes). Thus, 86 surveys were deemed usable.

Results

The overwhelming majority of respondents were school psychologists employed in public school districts. While the preponderance of respondents indicated membership in NASP, relatively few individuals (n = 26, 30%) possessed the NCSP credential. Most respondents held the Ed.S. degree (n = 59, 68%), with the remainder having a doctoral degree (Ed.D., Ph.D., Psy.D.). Of those individuals in possession of the doctoral degree, the majority were licensed as psychologists (n = 18, 66%). A small number held dual licensure as school psychologists and clinical psychologists (n = 4, 15%). The majority of individuals at the doctoral level worked in public schools and in private practice (n = 14, 52%).

Respondents indicated an average of approximately 8 years of practice as school psychologists (M = 8.3; SD = 4.2).

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of respondents' time estimates for administering, scoring, and interpreting each of the tests included in the questionnaire. All time estimates are expressed in minutes. Among the various categories of tests, respondents also indicated their preference of tests. In reviewing the questionnaire, respondents indicated they did not use some tests at all (e.g., Peabody Individual Achievement Test). In these circumstances, the test was omitted from presentation in Table 1, even though it may have been included in the questionnaire. Respondents' reliance on and use of technology in the assessment process (i.e., scoring or interpretation) is reported as a percentage of the time technology is used in reference to each test.

Discussion

Predictably, the various Wechsler scales are the first choice among school psychologists for the assessment of intelligence. No other instrument approaches the popularity of the Wechsler scales (87%). Following a distant second (12%) is the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability-Revised (WJ-R). Surprisingly, only one respondent (1%) indicated the Stanford Binet, Fourth Edition as his/her preferred test of intelligence. With regard to measures of nonverbal intelligence, results are fairly evenly distributed among the various tests, with a slight majority of (33%) of school psychologists preferring Raven's Progressive Matrices. The Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT), which is fairly new, seems to have gained some acceptance among school psychologists, with 19% of respondents indicating that the UNIT is their instrument of choice in the assessment of nonverbal abilities. In stark contrast to the wide acceptance of the Wechsler scales, the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test is preferred by only 9% of the school psychologists surveyed. Respondents prefer to use either the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement or the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement. In the assessment of behavior, the Behavioral Assessment System for Children and the Child Behavioral Checklist share equal popularity. The Draw-a-Person procedure and the Vineland Scales of Adaptive Behavior maintain their status as the preferred instruments of school psychology practitioners in the assessment of emotional functioning and adaptive behavior, respectively. The frequent use of these tests is probably due to their popularity in school psychology training programs. A review of the time estimates shows a moderate negative relationship (r = -

.34) between the time demands of a test and its stated preference or rank. School psychologists express a moderate preference for tests that are economical in terms of time. Apparently, tradition also plays a significant role in assessment. Some instruments, such as the WJR, have a solid theoretical and research foundation that enhances their acceptance and use.

As indicated by some of the large standard deviations reported in the time estimates, school psychologists disagree about the time demands required by various instruments. This apparent lack of agreement in time estimates may reflect the obvious differences in time required by specific examinees. For example, young children may require considerably more time than adolescents. Even with the wide variability among respondents, many of the time estimates reported in this study are substantially smaller than in previous studies (e.g., Ball, Archer, & Imhoff, 1994). This is especially obvious in the time estimates of test interpretation. It is unlikely that school psychologists are "faster" than other psychologists. A likely explanation for the decrease in time demands of test interpretation is the wide and accepted use of technology. All of the respondents reported using computer software in the assessment process. This is a dramatic increase over previous studies (e.g. Ball, Archer, & Imhoff, 1994). Some tests, such as the WJ-R, are only used and interpreted with the aid of technology. As the responsibilities of school psychologists broaden, time becomes a valuable commodity. Quite likely, the increased use of computer technology in the assessment process is a means of saving limited time. This unexpected finding raises serious concerns for ethics and standards of practice. Quoting the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics, "School psychologists will resist applications of technology that ultimately reduce the quality of service" (p. 13). While the use of technology may save valuable time, an over-reliance on computer software, especially in the interpretation of test results, may diminish professional integrity and standing in the psychological community. Computer generated psychological reports may "standardize" test interpretation at the expense of the unique, individual student. A major professional concern is that, as school psychologists become more reliant and dependent on software to aid interpretation of assessment data, we run the risk of becoming psychometrists, rather than school psychologists.

The results from the present study may be limited by the relatively small sample (n = 86). Additionally, each respondent only provided data for a subset of the tests included in the study. Therefore, the number of participants contributing data for each instrument is less than the total number of participants

in the study. Therefore, the present study may be considered a pre-study and the results may not generalize beyond the present sample. To overcome this limitation, future studies may focus more on the number of participants contributing data for each instrument, and less on the total number of participants included in the study. This will require a much larger sample, however, the results may provide a more robust estimate of the time school psychologists spend administering, interpreting, reporting, and scoring the results from psychoeducational evaluations.

Summary

The provision of psychological services in schools consists of many activities other than testing. At present, however, many school districts still define the major role of the school psychologist as a provider of psychoeducational evaluations. The present study provides school districts and school psychologists with time estimates, which may be used to quantify the actual time spent administering, interpreting, reporting, and scoring the results from psychoeducational evaluations.

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Table 1

Estimated Time Demands For Assessment

Instrument	Administering	Scoring	Interpreting	Use of Technology	First Preference
Cognitive Ability/Intelligence Tests					
Wechsler Scales	77 (12) min	22 (8) min	18 (12) min	91%	87%
SBFE	80 (14)	36 (10)	22 (14)	72	1
WJRCog	72 (12)	18 (6)	19 (9)	100	12
CAS	88 (17)	47 (14)	33 (12)	0	0
KABC	76 (10)	30 (7)	23 (9)	48	0
DAS	69 (11)	32 (9)	28 (10)	48	0
Nonverbal Intelligence					
UNIT	66 (11)	31 (8)	29 (11)	0	19
Leiter-R	73 (19)	30 (12)	31 (13)	48	23
Ravens	31 (7)	15 (5)	10 (5)	0	33
MAT	29 (6)	13 (4)	8 (3)	0	25
Achievement Tests					
WJRAch	61 (11)	19 (9)	16 (7)	100	42
KTEA	52 (12)	24 (7)	22 (6)	48	21
WIAT	49 (14)	23 (8)	19 (9)	48	9
CBA/CBM	--	--	19 (13)	48	6
WRAT-R	28 (7)	12 (6)	13 (7)	48	22
Behavioral Rating Scales					
BASC	11 (3)	21 (4)	23 (6)	100	43
Conners	16 (4)	28 (7)	21 (9)	48	14
Achenbach	12 (4)	19 (7)	23 (10)	48	43
Burks	9 (3)	20 (5)	20 (4)	0	0
Projective/Drawing					
Draw-a-Person	13 (6)	11 (4)	14 (4)	48	56
H-T-P	21 (4)	9 (3)	17 (4)	14	38
Kinetic Family Drawing	9 (3)	9 (3)	11 (3)	0	3
Roberts App. Test	23 (6)	19 (5)	15 (6)	0	3
Adaptive Behavior					
Vineland	46 (12)	14 (5)	10 (4)	14	93
SIB	34 (9)	13 (4)	11 (4)	0	7